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When Birds of Different Feather Flock Together: The Emerging Debate on “Organization as Communication” in the German-Speaking Countries

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In the German-speaking countries, organizational communication has no distinct tradition as a separate field within communication studies, where it is often subsumed under the field of public relations (see Theis-Berglmair’s contribution in this forum). Consequently, and apart from rare exceptions, among German-speaking scholars (e.g., Theis-Berglmair, 2003; Weder, 2010), organizational communication is primarily understood as “communication *in* organizations”, i.e. as internal communication (e.g., Buchholz & Knorre, 2010; Mast & Huck, 2008; Schick, 2010), by following the “container metaphor” with regard to the relation between organization and communication (Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996, p. 125). A consequence of this rather narrow focus is that German-speaking research on organizational communication is somewhat disconnected from international debates in the field, which, over the last decades, have shifted from the container metaphor to a more holistic understanding of organization *as* communication; that is, to the idea that organizations essentially consist of interconnected communicative practices (see Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009).

Recently, however, a group of young German-speaking scholars has emerged, whose members are particularly interested in the idea of the organization *as* communication. These

scholars not only have their academic home in communication studies but also come from neighboring disciplines such as management studies or organizational sociology. Their heterogeneous research activities have found a forum where ideas can be exchanged in the interdisciplinary young scholars' network "Organization as Communication" (OaC; <http://www.orgcom.org>), funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The network, launched in 2010, has organized several workshops over the past two years, which were dedicated to the "communication constitutes organizations" (CCO) perspective (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011). The idea that organizations are essentially constructed in and through language use fell on fertile soil in German academia. Its impact was amplified by the fact that the CCO perspective shares a basis in social-constructionist epistemology with various research strains prevalent in German-speaking management studies and organizational sociology, notably, Luhmann's theory of social systems (1995; 2000) and the constructionism of the "Erlangen School" (e.g., Steinmann, 1978).

In the light of these developments, it is the aim of our article to make the vivid "organization as communication" debate currently emerging in the German-speaking countries visible and accessible to an international audience. Our selective presentation of conceptual and empirical research is guided by a twofold question: first, what distinguishes the German-speaking scholars' take on organization as communication and second, in what way are they likely to contribute to ongoing and future international debates in the field of organizational communication? Our presentation has been structured on the basis of four questions that have played a formative role in the debate: (1) what are the minimum conditions organizations as communicative phenomena? (2) What is the "glue" that holds organizations as communicative entities together? (3) What specific advantages does the concept of communication offer to scholars in comparison to related concepts, such as practices, institutions, or routines? (4) What are the normative implications of adopting a communication-centered view of organizations?

On the minimum conditions of organizing

One fundamental issue arising from the debate on the idea of organization as communication centers on the following question: if organizations are indeed communicative phenomena, what are the prerequisite features that distinguish them from social interactions more generally? This question comes close to Sillince's provocative question (2011), in which he confronted the proponents of the CCO view with the question: what is it that makes organizations distinct from markets, networks, communities, or social movements? In the context of the debate among German-speaking scholars, there is a strong tendency—in line with Luhmann's theoretical framework (2000)—to grasp the emergence of a “decided order” (i.e., a set of interconnected decisions expressed through communication) as *the* distinct constitutive element of organizational phenomena (see also Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). The next crucial question is whether this criterion is sufficient in itself to support the argument that organizations are communicatively constituted or whether additional criteria are required, such as membership, rules, hierarchies, goals, division of labor, or clear boundaries (compare and contrast with McPhee & Zaug, 2000).

In response to this question, German-speaking scholars have proposed that the empirical examples of *extreme cases* would be a suitable starting point for exploring whether organizational phenomena can be perpetuated even if they lack features that are typical of organizations, such as membership, hierarchies, boundaries, etc. Recent examples of this line of research include studies on the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* (Kozica, Gebhardt, Kaiser, & Müller-Seitz, 2012), the hacker collective *Anonymous* (Dobusch, 2012), and the terrorist movement *al Qaeda* (Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2012). These studies provide empirical evidence that there are examples of organizations that most likely do not even have an overview of their membership base but can nevertheless perpetuate their existence against all odds. In view of that, identifiable membership (e.g., McPhee & Zaug, 2000) need not be seen

as an essential criterion for viewing organizations as communicative phenomena, provided that there is a “decided order” that is perpetuated; this is because membership is often attributed retrospectively (e.g., in the case of terrorist attacks by “members” of al Qaeda; Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2012). It follows that scholars of organizational communication will need to direct their attention to the specific forms of language use and identity formation (Kirchner, 2012) that in organizations of this kind serve as functional equivalents of other stabilizing mechanisms such as membership or hierarchies. Interestingly, these scholars’ focus on identifying the purest possible examples or extreme cases serves as a valuable heuristic in a long-standing tradition of thought that goes back to Weber’s notion of “ideal types” (1904/1949), i.e. theoretically imaginable but ultimately fictional forms that do not need to be grounded in empirical data but gain their heuristic value particularly from facilitating comparisons.

The “glue” that holds organizations together

German-speaking scholars regard organizations primarily as “middle ground” between interactions on the micro-level and society on the macro-level (for a concise summary of recent theoretical developments in the German-speaking community see Quandt & Scheufele, 2011). Interestingly, and in stark contrast to important works in the literature of the CCO perspective, they tend to approach the “meso level” of organizations from a top-down rather than from a bottom-up viewpoint. While CCO scholars from North America (e.g., Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009; Taylor, 2009) trace the emergence of organizations in the events of an interaction in a bottom-up manner (e.g., by means of conversation analysis; Cooren et al., 2008), German-speaking scholars take the empirical existence of organizational entities as a starting point and follow a top-down approach to examine how various interactions interconnect to form collectively organizations (e.g., Blaschke, 2008; Schoeneborn, 2008; Theis-Berglmair, 2009). In other words, the top-down view looks at the “glue” of connectivity

between interactions (cf. Monge & Contractor, 2003) rather than at the communication episodes themselves. In line with this view, Blaschke and his colleagues (2012) propose methodologies of network analysis as a means of reaching a more comprehensive understanding of large and complex organizations as networks of communication events (cf. Taylor et al., 1996). However, this view, which has been critically discussed in the “organization as communication” debate, poses a chicken-and-egg problem as it presupposes that organizations must somehow predate communication; this, however, would partly contradict the CCO perspective (e.g., Taylor, 2009).

Communication vis-à-vis other related concepts (e.g., practices, institutions, routines)

Another key question in the German-speaking literature concerns the distinct theoretical power of the communication concept vis-à-vis other related concepts; for instance, those of practices, institutions, or routines. This question is grounded in the observation that the concept of communication shares many characteristics with these conceptual “siblings,” namely features such as processuality, recursivity, or structuredness. As a result, some German-speaking scholars have started to engage in a systematic comparison of theoretical strands. For instance, some studies explore possible links with the related concepts of practice (e.g., Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011) or routines (Geiger & Schröder, 2012). In this context, one further important stream of research concentrates on the theoretical link between communication and institutions, which was also explored by Lammers (2011) and colleagues in a recent MCQ forum. However, in contrast to Lammers, whose notion of the “institutional message” (Lammers & Barbour, 2006) implies a somewhat mechanistic understanding of communication (cf. Axley, 1984), German-speaking scholars tend to promote a perspective that reconciles institutional theory with a constitutive notion of communication (Cooren, 2012), or at least an implicit version of the latter (Ashcraft et al., 2009). For instance, recent studies in the context of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) by Schultz and Wehmeier

(2010) or Haack and his colleagues (2012) have shown that narrative patterns and communicative sense-making processes between organizational actors and actors of the broader society (e.g., NGOs) drive the institutionalization of CSR practices also on the organizational level. In a similar vein, Sandhu (2009) illustrates the benefits of decentering the importance of individual actorhood in strategic communication and stresses the influence of regulative, normative, and cognitive institutional constraints on the practice of communication management (e.g. the implicit rules, values and cognitive frameworks that shape communication programs). Finally, Donges (2008) has explained how political parties as organizational actors are shaped and formed by the institutional constraints of the media.

In one way or another, all these works understand organizations as communicative phenomena that are enabled and constrained by institutionalized templates of communication on the societal level. Consequently, even though most of these works rely on an implicit, rather than an explicit, variant of the CCO perspective (Ashcraft et al., 2009), we believe they can be particularly helpful in enriching our understanding of the relation between organization and society—an aspect that has not been theorized as such by CCO scholars, who rarely leave the *terra firma* of interaction (e.g., Cooren, Taylor, & van Every, 2006), as argued above.

The normative implications of adopting a communication-centered view of organizations

The final question we will examine here in the context of the debate on organizations as communication in the German-speaking countries concerns the normative implications of adopting a communication-centered view of organizations. Among German-speaking scholars, the interest in the normative value of theories has a long tradition in the social sciences, particularly in business and management studies (as described by Müller-Camen & Salzgeber, 2005, p. 282). Proponents of this view follow the idea that the objective of the

social sciences is not only to describe social reality but also to criticize it and to foster change for the better.

The normative dimension of a communication-centered view of organizations has been fruitfully explored especially in works that draw on Habermas's theory of communicative action (1987). Even though Habermas's work lacks an explicit ontology of organizations, drawing on his theory can help advance the notion of communication as constitutive of organizations (e.g. see Burkart, 2010; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). In this view, organizations fundamentally depend on the communicative and deliberative relations with their various stakeholders for maintaining their legitimacy (i.e. their "license to operate") and ultimately for surviving as organizations—which is comparable to the quasi-contractual understanding of communicative constitution that Robichaud, Giroux, and Taylor propose (2004) or the "communicative theory of the firm" developed by Kuhn (2008). In this regard, we believe that a Habermasian view of the organization–communication nexus can fruitfully complement recent debates in CCO thinking on the fundamental embeddedness of organizations as communicative endeavors in society and on their interconnectedness with other organizations (e.g., Koschmann, Kuhn, & Pfarrer, 2012).

However, the works by Scherer and his colleagues place particular emphasis on linking a constitutive notion of communication with a critical edge (see also studies by Deetz; e.g., McClellan & Deetz, 2009). We identify a similar potential in promoting the normative side of CCO thinking in the work of Fassauer (2012), who draws on the concept of the "struggle for recognition," developed by Honneth (1996)—another social theorist who belongs to the critical tradition of the Frankfurt School—and attempts to link it to the CCO perspective. In a nutshell, she argues that an actor's interest in becoming recognized, respected, and "heard" is what primarily drives communicative struggles in organizational

contexts. This view implies that scholars ought to consider aspects of inclusion and individual acknowledgement when conceptualizing organizations as communicative phenomena.

Concluding remarks

As this article has shown, there are many overlaps between central views of the German-speaking debate on “organization as communication” and the theoretical tenets of the CCO perspective (Cooren et al., 2011). However, as we have also tried to show, what distinguishes this debate is, first, that it focuses on ideal types and extreme cases, as well as on the connectivity between communication episodes and theory comparisons, and second, that it has a critical-normative edge. For those reasons, the German-speaking debate can fruitfully contribute to the CCO perspective as an intellectual endeavor, provided that the scholars involved bridge the transatlantic divide and connect their work to international research. Moreover, we believe that the activities of the interdisciplinary OaC network open up the possibility of establishing for the first time in German-speaking academia organizational communication as a research field in its own right and that would represent a counterweight to the functionalist notion of strategic communication (as prevalent in publication research) by focusing on the core of communication research: the constitutive power of communication to form social relations and social entities such as organizations. We hope to have contributed to these efforts by promoting the visibility and joint identity of these strands of research.

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